

"Solitude," by Guy de Maupassant (1884)

We had been dining at the house of a friend, and the dinner had been very gay. After it broke up, one of the party, an old friend, said to me:

"Let us take a stroll in the Champs-Elysees."

I agreed, and we went out, slowly walking up the long promenade, under trees hardly yet covered with leaves. There was hardly a sound, save that confuse and constant murmur which Paris makes. A fresh breeze fanned our faces, and a legion of stars were scattered over the black sky like a golden powder.

My companion said to me:

"I do not know why, but I breathe better here at night than anywhere else. It seems to me that my thoughts are enlarged. I have at times, a sort of glimmering in my soul, that makes me believe, for a second, that the divine secret of things is about to be discovered. Then the window is closed, and my vision is ended."

From time to time we saw two shadows glide along the length of the thickets; then we passed a bench, where two people, seated side by side, made but one black spot.

My friend murmured:

"Poor things! They do not inspire me with disgust, but with an immense pity. Among all the mysteries of human life there is one which I have penetrated; our great torment in this existence comes from the fact that we are eternally alone -- all our efforts and all our actions are directed toward escaping this solitude. Those two lovers there on the benches in the open air are seeming, as we -- as all creatures are seeking -- to make their isolation cease, if only for a minute or less. They are living and always will live alone; and we also.

"This is more or less apparent to all of us. For some time I have endured this abominable pain of having understood, of having discovered the frightful solitude in which I live, and I know that nothing can make it cease -- nothing. Do you hear? Whatever we may attempt, whatever we may do, whatever may be the misery of our hearts, the appeal of our lips, the clasp of our arms, we are always alone. I have asked you to walk tonight, so that I shall not have to enter my own house, because now I suffer horribly from the solitude of my home.. What good does it do me? I speak to you, you listen to me, yet we are both alone, side by side but alone. You understand?

"'Blessed are the poor in spirit,' say the Scriptures. They have the illusion of happiness. They do not feel our solitary misery, they do not wander, as I do, through life, without contact save of elbows, without joy save the egotistic satisfaction of understanding, of seeing, of divining, and of suffering eternally from the knowledge of our never-ending isolation.

"You think me slightly deranged -- do you not? Listen to me. Since I have felt the solitude of my being, it seems to me that I am daily sinking more deeply into a dark vault, whose sides I cannot find, whose end I do not know, and which, perhaps, has no end. I sink without anyone with me, or around me, without any living person making this same gloomy journey. This vault is life. Sometimes I hear noises, voices, confused sounds. But I never know exactly from whom they come; I never meet anybody, I never find another hand in this darkness that surrounds me. Do you understand?

"Some men have occasionally divined this frightful suffering. De Musset has written:

Who comes? Who calls me? No one.  
I am alone. One o'clock strikes.  
O Solitude! O Misery!

"But with him there is only a passing doubt, and not a definite certainty as with me. He was a poet; he peopled life with fantasies, with dreams. He was never really alone. I -- I am alone.

"Gustave Flaubert, one of the great unfortunates of this world, because he was on of the great lights, wrote to a friend this despairing phrase: 'We are all in a desert. Nobody understands anybody.'

"No, nobody understands anybody -- whatever one thinks, whatever one says, whatever one attempts. Does the earth know what passes in those stars that are hurled like a spark of fire across the firmament -- so far that we perceive only the splendor of some? Think of the innumerable army of others lost in infinitude -- so near to each other that they form perhaps a whole, as the molecules of a body!

"Well, man does not know what passes in another many any more. We are farther from one another than the stars, and far more isolated, because thought is unfathomable.

"Do you know anything more frightful that this constant contact with beings that we cannot penetrate? We love one another as if we were fettered, very close, with extended arms, without succeeding in reaching one another. A torturing need of union hampers us, but all our efforts remain barren, our abandonment useless, our confidences unfruitful, our embraces powerless, our caresses vain. When we wish to join each other, our sudden emotions make us only clash against each other.

"I never feel myself more alone than when I open my heart to some friend, because I then better understand the insuperable obstacle. He is there, my friend; I see his clear eyes above me, but the soul behind them I do not see. He listens to me. What is he thinking? Yes, what is he thinking? You do not understand this torment? He hates me, perhaps, -- or scorns me, -- or mocks me! He reflects upon what I have said; he judges me, he rails at me, he condemns me, and considers me either very mediocre or a fool.

"How am I to know what he thinks? How am I to know whether he loves me as I love him, and what is at work in that little round head? What a mystery is the unknown thought of a being, the hidden and independent thought, that we can neither know nor control, neither command nor conquer!

"And I! I have wished in vain to give myself up entirely; to open all the doors of my soul, and I do not succeed in giving myself up. I still remain in the depth, the very depth, the secret abode of me, where no one can penetrate. No one can discover it, or enter there, because no one resembles me, because no one understands anyone.

"You, at least, understand me at this moment; no: you think I am mad! You examine me; you shrink from me! You ask yourself: 'What's the matter with him tonight?' But if you succeed in seizing, in divining, one day, my horrible and subtle suffering, come to me and say only: 'I have understood you!' and you will make me happy, for a second, perhaps.

"Women make me still more conscious of my solitude. Misery! Misery! How I have suffered through women: because they, more than men, have often given me the illusion of not being alone!

"When one falls in love it seems as though one expands. A superhuman felicity envelopes you! Do you know why? Do you know why you feel then this sensation of exceeding happiness? It is simply because one imagines himself no longer alone. Isolation, the abandonment of the human being seems to cease. What an error!

"More tormented even than we, by this eternal need of love which gnaws at our solitary heart, are women, the great delusion and the dream.

"You know those delicious hours passed face to face with a being with long hair, charming features, and a look that excited us to live. What delirium misleads our mind! What illusion carries us away! Does it not seem that presently our souls shall form but one? But this 'presently' never comes; and, after weeks of waiting, of hope, and of deceptive joy, you find yourself again, one day, more alone than you have ever been before.

"After each kiss, after each embrace, the isolation is increased. And how frightfully one suffers!

"Has not Sully Prudhomme written:

Caresses are only restless transports,  
Fruitless attempts of poor love which essay  
The impossible union of souls by the bodies.

"And then -- goodbye. It is over. One hardly recognizes the woman who has been everything to us for a moment of life, and whose thoughts, intimate and commonplace, undoubtedly, we have never known.

"At the very hour when it would seem, in that mysterious accord of beings, in the complete intermingling of ideas and of aspirations, that you were sounding the very depth of her soul, one word -- one word only, sometimes -- will reveal your error, will show you, like a flash of lightning in the night, the black abyss between you.

"And still, that which is best in the world is to pass a night near a woman you love, without speaking, completely happy in the sole sensation of her presence. Ask no more, for two beings have never yet been united.

"As to myself, no, I have closed by soul. I tell no more to anybody what I believe, what I think, or what I love. Knowing myself condemned to this horrible solitude, I look upon things without expressing my opinion. What matter to me opinions, quarrels, pleasures, or beliefs! Being unable to participate with anyone, I have withdrawn myself from all. My invisible self lives unexplored. I have common phrases for answers to the questions of each day, and a smile which says, 'Yes,' when I do not even wish to take the trouble of speaking. Do you understand?"

We had traversed the long avenue to the Arc de Triomphe, and had then walked back to the Place de la Concorde, for he had said all this slowly, adding many other things which I no longer remember.

He stopped, and stretching his arm toward the great granite obelisk standing on the pavement of Paris, losing its long Egyptian profile in the night of the stars -- an exiled monument, bearing on its side the history of its country written in strange signs -- said brusquely:

"Look -- we are all like that stone."

Then he left me without adding a word. Was he intoxicated? Was he mad? Was he wise? I do not yet know. Sometimes it seems to me that he was right; sometimes it seems to me that he had lost his mind.